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Successful Asians Sabotage Peers' Legitimate Self-Enhancement

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Shi Liu entitled "Successful Asians Sabotage Peers' Legitimate Self-Enhancement." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

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Successful Asians Sabotage Peers' Legitimate Self-Enhancement

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Dedication

To Knoxville,
where I meet great people and become a better me.

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Abstract

This research examines how Asian students react to peers' self-enhancement. I found that even totally legitimate self-enhancement (i.e., agreeing to publish one's high score) will get an Asian sabotaged by other successful peers in their society. In Study 1, I found that Asian students who succeeded, rather than who failed or in the control condition, were more likely to sabotage a slightly self-enhancing target person who agreed to publish his/her success. In Study 2, I replicated the results when participants and the target person were in different domains of success.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Literature Review

"Modesty only begins with the knowledge of evil." (Rousseau, 1979)

Who doesn't want to be at the center of attention when they succeed, enjoying accolades and admiration? But do people still want the center stage when it means being exposed to hidden arrows? In this paper, I examined an inherent danger Asians are facing when they succeed and get glory: sabotage. I further examined an ironic fact that it is the successful Asians—who want to protect their own unique glory—are more likely to sabotage another target who takes the spotlight.

Asians' Tactical Self-Enhancement

It is a long-held belief that Asians are modest and do not desire positive self-regard (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), until recent studies suggested otherwise. When Yamaguchi and colleagues (2007) used implicit measures of self-esteem instead of explicit self-reports, they found that Japanese participants' self-esteem was not lower than European participants' self-esteem. Kim and his colleagues (2009) found that Chinese students made more favorable self-evaluations when they were in a private setting cubicle than if they reported openly to the experimenter; Also, when Asians rated themselves on negatively-stated traits—i.e., *un*attractive, *un*intelligent, they rated themselves positively. Gaertner and colleagues (2012) showed that Asian students wanted self-enhancing and self-improving feedbacks over self-effacing feedbacks just as Westerners. In all these cases when the concern of violating the modesty norm is not salient, Asians do show that they feel good about themselves.

Given that Asians secretly feel good about themselves, one question arises: Why do they have to do it in such a secretive way? A common explanation is the modesty norm (Kurman, 2003), that Asians personally endorse the virtue of modesty. This explanation, however, fails to show why Asians are immodest in private. If Asians are truly modest, they should be modest in private as well. The tactical nature of Asians' modesty suggests that the modesty norm cannot fully explain the case. Instead, being tactical suggests Asians may not personally believe in the norm but there are social pressures enforcing it. A squeezed sponge will spring back to its original shape when the external pressure is released. Asians, when the social pressure of the modesty norm is removed, show their desire to feel good about themselves. But it's not clear from whom the social force that shapes the norm comes.

Utilizing Social Scripts for Selfish Purposes

People maintain social scripts for different reasons. Besides the intrinsic purpose to maintain the script itself, people can also utilize social scripts for their own selfish purposes.

Sabotage, for instance, can be used to maintain self-esteem. Tesser proposed a Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (1988) suggesting our evaluation of the self in important domains is based on our comparison with close others and once a positive self-esteem is threatened, people can recover it by downward social comparison – the idea that we are somehow better than others (Tesser, 2010). Sabotage provides a way to lull other down and therefore maintains self-esteem. Previous research conducted in the U.S. shows that sabotaging others can reduce or remove threats when the sabotage is justified

by stereotypes (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For instance, participants who lost in a gender knowledge competition contest could recover their self-esteem if the winning student violated gender norms and participants were able to sabotage the winning student justifiably (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004); female students could reduce the upward social comparison threat from a successful woman, if they were able to derogate this woman for her being hostile and unlikable (Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearns, 2008); participants who received negative feedback about their intelligence could recover their self-image by derogating a Jewish American job candidate for being a "Jewish Princess" (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Stereotypes provide material to harm others, for perpetrators' own benefits.

I reasoned that social norms such as modesty, by describing how people should behave in certain situations, can also provide licenses to harm others for selfish purposes.

As I reviewed, Westerners utilize social scripts as justification to sabotage others for self-image maintenance. Can people also utilize social scripts to sabotage others for other purposes? Another motive to sabotage others is in competition, where people are competing for important resources and it provides a good motivation to put others down.

Publicizing Success as a Double Sword in Asia

Publicizing success can make one feel good about themselves, especially for Asians. Honor rolls, awards lists and newspaper reports about someone's achievement can be found everywhere in a social world. These forms of recognition bring one's success to a larger audience and build glory. Asians, as a "face" culture (Leung & Cohen, 2011), value others' opinions (Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010) and especially their good

opinions of the self (Gaertner et al., 2012), so the public recognition brought by publicizing success may be especially rewarding to Asians. Therefore, the opportunity to publicizing one's success is an important social resource.

Tempting as it is, publicizing one's success can also be troublesome for Asians. The "showing off" part of it violates the modesty norm, which is more dominant in Asian than in the Western world (Chen, Bond, Bacon, Donghui, & Buchtel, 2009). Therefore, publicizing one's success may cause social sanctions. For instance, research found that Asians have mixed emotions following their success—they are happy for their achievement but they also experience negative emotions arising from relationship concerns: Japanese fear "troubling others" (Miyamoto, Uchida, & Ellsworth, 2010) and Chinese are concerned about "others jealous or envious" (Zhang & Cross, 2011). These findings suggest that success may bring unwanted reactions from others.

But who are most likely to give social sanctions against other people's self-enhancement? I reason that it is the successful Asians, wanting to protect their own unique glory from their successful peers, who are more likely to sanction another person who takes the spotlight. Therefore, I designed a behavioral study to test this idea.

Chapter 2

Study 1

Participants and Design

89 undergraduates (26 male, 63 female; average age = 19 years old) at a large university in China participated in the experiment in exchange for a payment of 10 RMB (equivalent to1.6 US Dollars). Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 3 (participant performance: success vs. failure vs. no feedback) × 2 (target spotlight: yes vs. no) between-subjects design. There were two sessions and the participants were led to believe that these two sessions were unrelated. In the first session, all participants did a math test (except those in the no-feedback condition), during which they succeeded or failed. In the second session, the experimenter asked participants to set experiment conditions for a target person. In this session, I manipulated whether this target person accepted spotlight and measured how much the real participants sabotaged the target person.

Manipulation of performance. I manipulated participants' performance using a procedure adopted from Trope and Pomerantz's (1998) study. Participants were asked to complete a math test. In order to induce feelings of success or failure in participants, I manipulated their expectation of the difficulty and the actual difficulty level of the test[1]. The easy test consisted of five easy items and the difficult test consisted of two easy items and three difficult items. Following Trope and Pomerantz's design (1998), in the success condition, participants were told that "this test is very hard and most people do not finish it in time." They were, however, given the easy version of the math test.

Therefore, they would perform better than they had expected and have a feeling of success. In the failure condition, participants were told that "this test is very easy and most people can finish in time." They were then given the difficult version of the test. Therefore, they would perform worse than they had expected and have a feeling of failure. In the control condition, participants were given solutions to the difficult version of the test and rated the difficulty level of the test.

After the math test, the experimenter asked all the participants if they could help set up an experiment condition for a target student. Every participant agreed.

Manipulation of spotlight. The experimenter told participants that this target student performed well in a math test and would participate in future tasks. Then, participants received a debriefing form (as shown in Figure 1) that was ostensibly filled out by the target. From that form, participants learned the target's sex (matched with the participant), score from a previous test (99th percentile) and most importantly, whether this target student chose to publicize his or her name, photo and high score on campus media. In the spotlight condition, participants would learn that the target had accepted this invitation by circling the "Yes, include my name and photo" option in the debriefing form. In the non-spotlight condition, participants learned that the target had declined the invitation by circling the "No, thanks" option.

Measures of Sabotage. After reading the target's form, participants began to set up experiment conditions for the target. They learned that the experiment the target would participate in was about "math performance under distraction" and that they would

decide how much distraction the target should take during the test by indicating it on a sheet of paper titled “Experiment Condition Setting Sheet”.

Number. The first distraction was “cognitive load”—a random number to rehearse during a math test. Participants indicated the number of digits the target would have to rehearse. As a reference, they were told that people could usually remember seven digit numbers.

Noise. The second distraction was noise. Participants indicated how much noise this target should have during a different math test. The noise induction paradigm is a widely used measure of aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Fast & Chen, 2009). Participants were told that the noise level ranges from 0 decibel (dB)—the lowest level of sound a person can detect, 40-50 dB—people talking, to 110 dB—the highest level of sound to which we can expose participants without causing damage.

The number of digits and noise level set by the participants served as measures of sabotage because longer numbers and louder noise made the target’s test more difficult. The major difference between the two measures of sabotage was that the noise sabotage posed a possible physical harm to the target, whereas number sabotage did not. While I expected people to protect their glory via non-physical sabotage (i.e., asking the target to rehearse a long number), I was not certain whether or not they would use physical aggression (i.e., noise blast) to protect the spotlight.

Results

Manipulation check. I checked how many correct answers the participants had. Participants in the success condition had more correct answers ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 0.91$)

than participants in the failure condition[2] (M = 1.41, *SD* = 0.78), $F(1, 57) = 203.95$, $p < .001$.

Sabotage. The number and noise sabotage were not correlated ($r = .13$, $p > .2$), so I analyzed them separately.

Sabotage by number. I excluded three extreme responses. An overall 3 (participant performance: success vs. failure vs. no feedback) × 2 (target spotlight: yes vs. no) between-subjects analysis of variance[3] (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect for participant performance, $F(2, 80) = 4.58$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$ and target spotlight, $F(1, 80) = 10.5$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$, $d = 0.63$. As shown in Table 1, overall, successful participants gave more digits than failed participants, $F(1,80) = 6.94$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.71$, and no-feedback participants, $F(1, 80) = 6.87$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.83$, and the latter two didn't differ, $F(1, 80) < 0.1$, $p > .9$, $d = 0$. And targets who accepted the spotlight were given more digits to remember than those who declined the spotlight.

Critical to my hypothesis, there was a marginally significant Participant Performance × Target Spotlight interaction, $F(2, 80) = 2.86$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = 0.027$, indicating that whether successful participants gave more digits than the other two groups was moderated by target spotlight condition. The effect for participant performance was only significant when the target was in the spotlight, $F(2, 80) = 7.21$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.137$, but not significant when the target was not in the spotlight, $F(2, 80) = 0.15$, $p = .86$, $\eta^2 = 0.003$. Further planned contrasts revealed that when the target was in the spotlight, successful participants gave longer digits of numbers to them than failed participants $F(1,80) = 11.7$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.87$, and no-feedback participants, $F(1, 80) = 9.86$, $p =$

.002, $d = 0.81$, and that the latter two did not differ, $F(1, 80) = 0.078$, $p > .9$, $d = 0.11$.

Sabotage by noise. Submitting noise to the same 3 (success vs. failure vs. no feedback) × 2 (modest vs. immodest) ANOVA did not reveal any significant results, all Fs < 2, $p > .13$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support our hypothesis that successful people strategically sabotage others who were in the spotlight, but not those who were not in the spotlight..

I was also wondering why the results of noise sabotage were not significant. One explanation for the discrepancy between the "number-of-digits" sabotage and the "noise-blast" sabotage, is that participants were willing to sabotage the other person, unless such sabotage entailed physical aggression. Another explanation, is that participants sabotaged with "number-of-digits," but not with noise, because the former, but not the latter, is task relevant (i.e., rehearsing digits and math). Consequently, I modified the task in Study 2 so that the target's performance (and subsequent test) was in a non-math domain. Here, if participants are willing to sabotage in a non-physically aggressive manner, I should again find that successful-participants confronted by a person who could potentially steal their spotlight would sabotage on the digit measure but not on the noise measure. Study 2 was therefore designed to test these possibilities. I examined if successful participants (and only successful participants) would sabotage the target in the spotlight even when the target succeeded in a different domain other than math.

Chapter 3

Study 2

Participants and Design

I followed the procedures in Study 1 and the only major difference was that I changed the domain the target succeeded in into creativity—a different domain than math in which the real participants succeeded in. From the debriefing form that was ostensibly completed by the target, the real participants learned that this target scored 99 in a "*Creativity - Draw an Alien*" test and would further participate in creativity tests. In addition, I changed the question set in the failure condition into ten items (five difficult items, five easy items) to make it harder, ensuring that participants in this condition would have a feeling of failure.

A total of 55 Chinese college students participated (26 women, 29 men, average age = 19.7 years old). Four were excluded because they failed in the success condition (had less than 80% correct answers) and one were excluded because of extreme responses (exceeding 3SD), leaving a total of 50 participants. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (performance: success, failure) × 2 (target spotlight: accept, decline) between-subjects design.

Results and Discussion

The number and noise sabotage were weakly correlated ($r = .21$, $p > .12$), so I analyzed them separately.

Sabotage by number. Consistent with our hypothesis, submitting digits of numbers to a Performance × Target Spotlight ANOVA revealed a significant interaction,

$F(1, 46) = 6.34$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$. As shown in Figure 2, the simple effects of target spotlight revealed that successful participants gave more digits to the targets who accepted the spotlight ($M = 8.82$, $SD = 3.25$) than those who declined it ($M = 6.91$, $SD = 2.34$), $F(1, 46) = 2.81$, $p = .10$, $d = 0.65$. The failed participants, however, showed a reversed pattern. They gave more digits to the targets ($M = 8.92$, $SD = 2.60$) who declined the spotlight than those who accepted it ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 2.48$), $F(1, 46) = 3.62$, $p = .06$, $d = 0.72$. None of the main effects were significant, Fs $< .1$, ps $> .9$.

Sabotage by noise. Submitting noise to the same 2 (success vs. failure) × 2 Target Spotlight (accept vs. decline) ANOVA did not reveal any significant results, all Fs < 1.7, $p > .2$.

The results of Study 2 showed that successful participants sabotaged spotlight-accepting targets by asking them to rehearse longer numbers, even when the target succeeded in a different domain and when there was no indication that the target was good at math. This helped clarify our questions in Study 1, that successful participants sabotaged a spotlight-accepting target not because they viewed the target as a possible challenger to themselves in math, but because the target got the spotlight. The results of the noise sabotage did not work when the target was successful in a non-math domain, suggesting there were inherent differences between the nature of noise and number sabotage used by Asians.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

This research contributes to the study of Asians' tactical self-enhancement. First, it suggests that successful Asians desire the spotlight and therefore sabotage those who have it. Second, as a behavioral study, this research shows what would happen if Asians self-enhance in a non-tactical way. Although publicizing one's success is a totally legitimate and widespread behavior, this study finds that even this behavior will make one more likely to get sabotage from other successful people in Asia. Given that successful people usually have more influence on others' lives and that sabotage is hard to detect and prevent, Asians may feel the necessity to be tactical in their self-enhancement.

Why Noise Sabotage Did Not Work

In Study 1 and Study 2, the results from noise sabotage were not significant. One reason may be that higher noise volume does not always indicate a higher sabotage intention in a study called "performance under distraction". Some participants commented in their debriefing that they found the noise level of people talking (40-60 dB) was most distracting, so they set the noise level in that range, instead of a high volume of noise. So a 40 dB noise setting may underlie more sabotage intentions than a 110 dB noise setting. This could count for why the results of noise sabotage were not significant. Another possibility, which is more related to cultural practice, is that noise blast is more of a physical harm than rehearsing a long number. Asians may be unwilling to physically harm the target and prefer a sabotage method that is more tactical and

covert. It is worth studying the cultural difference in the forms of aggression and sabotage.

Alternative Explanation

One alternative explanation of why successful people sabotaged peers' self-enhancement more is that successful people are more likely to have "noblesse oblige", that people in high social status tend to maintain social norms (Hollander, 1958). Therefore their sabotage may function as sanctions towards those who violated the norm. And the sanction is altruistic punishment (Fehr & Gächter, 2002) which is to maintain the norm, and not for self-benefits (i.e., defend one's glory). Although this explanation is possible, one should note that agreeing to publicize one's success is a totally legitimate behavior and a very mild offense of the modesty norm. At the same time, this behavior was invited by an authority person (the experimenter). While agreeing publicizing one's success violated the modesty norm, declining the invitation violated the obedience norm to cooperate, which is also a prominent norm (Stopes-Roe & Cochrane, 1990) in Asian. From the results, successful people only sabotaged those who violated the modesty norm, but not those who violated the cooperation norm, suggesting that they were tactically sabotaging those who got the spotlight, but not everyone who mildly violated a prominent social norm.

Social Scripts Provide License to Harm

Our study finds that even the modesty norm can be used as a license to sabotage others for selfish purposes. Different from stereotypes and gender norms targeting a certain group of people, the modesty norm can be applied to almost every member in an

Asian society. And it is more focused on people's situational reactions instead of their social categories, so every member subject to this norm may keep an eye on their behavior because even a mild immodest behavior can grant others justifications to sabotage.

Being Modest to Avoid Sabotage

Research with U.S. participants shows that fear of backlash is an important reason for people to hide their success and not lean in for themselves (Phelan & Rudman, 2010). It can be Blacks hiding their academic achievement, Whites hiding their rapping talent (Phelan & Rudman, 2010) or females leaning back and lowering their self-promotion (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). In all these cases, possible deviants fear sanctions against violating stereotypes' scripts. Our study showed that the modesty norm—a social script describing how people should behave—can also results in sabotage against deviants.

Similarly, why do Asians need to carefully obey the modesty norm even though they do feel good about themselves? My research offers one possible answer: because they have to avoid sabotage. When someone gets an opportunity to be immodest (i.e., publicizing a test score), she also has a good chance of threatening others' self-esteem or personal glory. The cold comfort is that this immodest behavior can immediately provide a license for others to sabotage and therefore to recover from the threat. It is ironic, though, that one person's desire and envy of the spotlight makes another person fear the spotlight. Everyone is trapped in a vicious cycle of being modest and living by the norm. There is a Chinese saying that "Tall trees catch much wind (*shu da zhao feng*)", meaning

outstanding people suffer more attacks. How to hide one's goodness properly and how to prevent sabotage is an important life-long lesson for Asians. Evidence showed that Chinese participants were more accepting when a person told a lie to deny a good deed than did Americans, and this tendency grew with age (Genyue, Heyman, & Lee, 2011), suggesting that Chinese prefer not to be the "tall trees", even if it requires telling a lie.

Asians, as all human beings, want to feel good about themselves. But to feel good, most Asian may feel they have to learn how to keep themselves from sabotage. It is like walking a tightrope, and the crux is to hold the balance. For Asians, one side of the balance pole is to keep feeling good about themselves and the other side is to not make themselves vulnerable. The secret lies in the tactical nature of their self-enhancement.

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Appendix

Math Test Used in Study 1 & 2

Instructions: In the following task, you will use elementary arithmetic (+, -, ×, /) between four numbers to get 24. For instance, for "2, 3, 4, 5", one of the possible answers is 4 × (5+3 - 2) = 24. You can change the order of numbers.

Failure Condition (Study 1)

2，5，5，13	
8，3，3，8	
3，4，5，7	
3，7，7，3	
1，6，6，8	

Failure Condition (Study 2)

2，5，5，13	
3，4，5，7	
3，5，7，9	
2，10，4， 10	
2，3，4，6	
4，5，11，13	
8，3，3，8	
7， 8， 8， 9	
3， 7，7，3	
1，6，6，8	

Success Condition (Study 1 & 2)

2，5，5，13	
7，7，10，1	
3，4，5，7	
5，1，5，1	
2，3，4，6	

Note 1. I did not use the GRE math test as in Trope and Pomerantz's (1998) study, because students at the university where the experiment was conducted usually got high scores in GRE math test. Instead, I used a popular Chinese math game called "Compute 24". In this test, participants were asked to use elementary arithmetic (+, -, ×, /) between four numbers to get 24. For instance, for "2, 3, 4, 5", one of the possible answers is 4 × (5+3 - 2) = 24. By changing the number sets, I were able to create easy items (i.e., "2, 3, 4, 6") and difficult items (i.e., "3, 3, 7, 7").

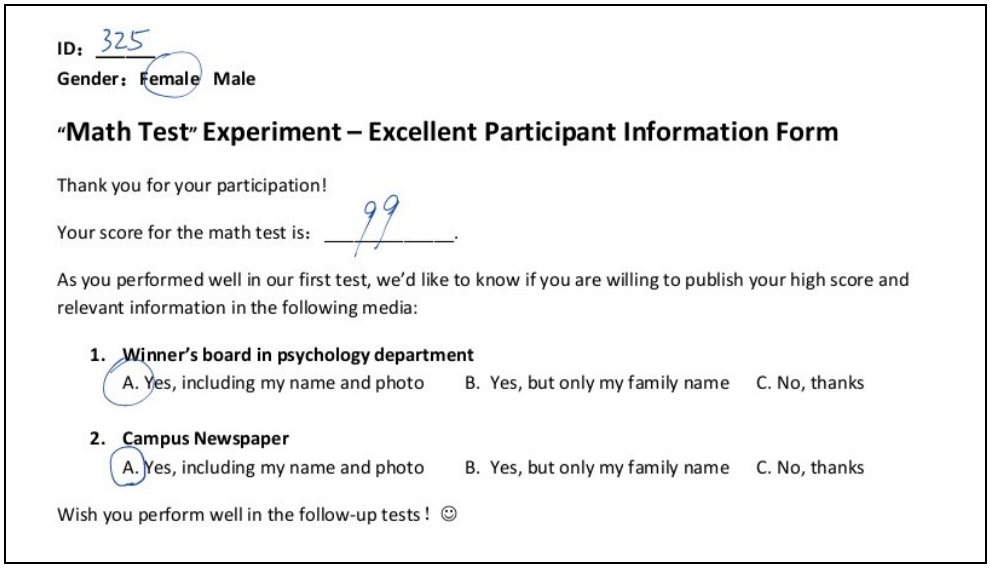
Note 2. Given the number of correct answers is count data, I also analyzed the data using Poisson regression and yielded same patterns.

Note 3. I also analyzed the data assuming heterogeneity of variance and yielded same patterns.

Table 1. Mean Digits of Numbers Given by Participants as a Function of Their Performance and Targets' Spotlight Condition in Study 1

	Participants			
Target Spotlight	Success	Failure	No feedback	Total
Yes	11.07 (4.50)	7.57 (2.65)	7.86 (2.60)	8.83 (3.66)
No	7.21 (1.42)	6.93 (1.49)	6.67 (2.50)	6.93 (1.85)
Total	9.14 (3.82)	7.24 (2.12)	7.24 (2.57)	7.86 (3.01)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.



ID: 325

Gender: Female Male

"Math Test" Experiment – Excellent Participant Information Form

Thank you for your participation!

Your score for the math test is: 99.

As you performed well in our first test, we'd like to know if you are willing to publish your high score and relevant information in the following media:

1. **Winner's board in psychology department**
   A. Yes, including my name and photo B. Yes, but only my family name C. No, thanks

2. **Campus Newspaper**
   A. Yes, including my name and photo B. Yes, but only my family name C. No, thanks

Wish you perform well in the follow-up tests ! ☺

Figure 1. Manipulation of targets' spotlight condition. In the spotlight condition, the target circled two "A"s as shown in the picture. In the non-spotlight condition, the target circled two "C"s. Adapted from Phelan and Rudman (2010). Gender was matched between the target and the participant.

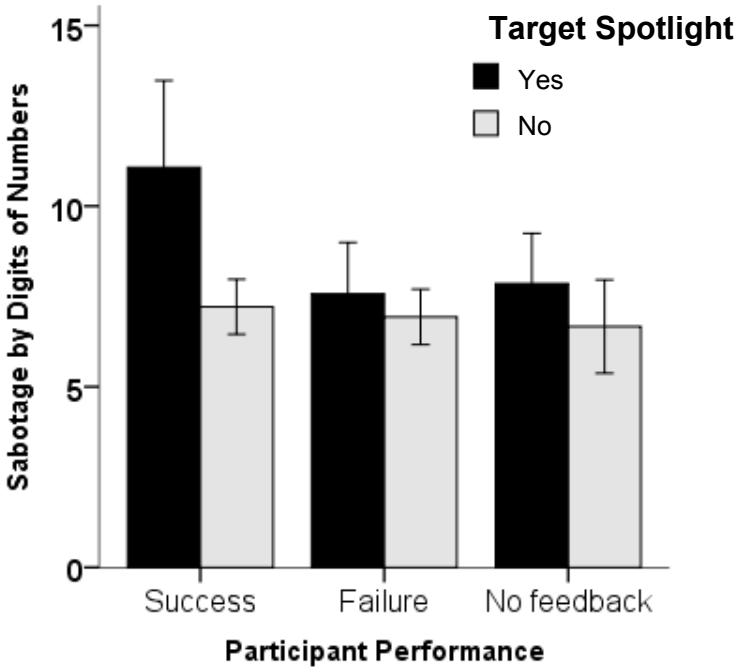


Figure 2. Sabotage by digits of numbers as a function of participants' performance and targets' spotlight condition (Study 1). Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

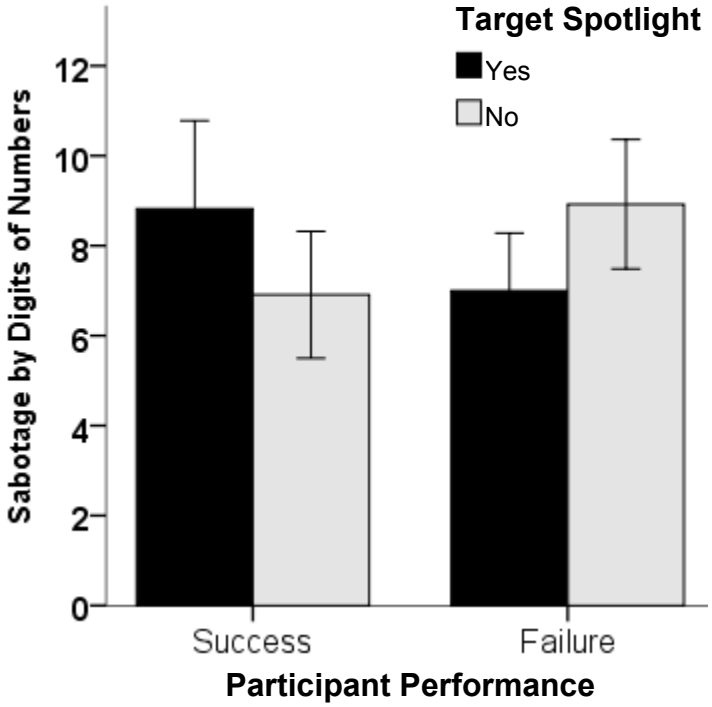


Figure 3. Sabotage by digits of numbers as a function of participants' performance and targets' spotlight condition (Study 2). Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Vita

Shi Liu was born and grew up in Wuhan, China. Shi obtained her B.S. in economics and M.Education in counseling from Tsinghua University in Beijing. She moved to the States with her husband and worked at Berkeley as a lab manager for a year and then moved to Knoxville for her master's study. Berkeley and Knoxville have incepted a hippie and a hillbilly in her identity, and she's very proud of that!